

## [Living on the Hill]

Mari Tomasi 1940

### LIVING ON THE HILL

She was taking care of the Alexander babies for the afternoon. The three Alexanders sat on the lawn, their legs straight out in front of them their backs to a hedge of purple and white phlox. Ann, a few feet away, was tossing them a rubber ball. In plaid playsuit, her head a cluster of tight black curls, she might have been of graded school age.

"I graduated from Spaulding High last June," Ann said. "Office work is what I wanted — typing and shorthand, but there're few openings here in Barre. I've applied several places. They all say they'll keep me in mind. That's all it amounts to, I guess. Two of my classmates got WPA jobs in Montpelier. I tried. They said I'd have to be certified.

"Maybe they did right in not certifying me. I can think of plenty who need the money more than I do. We're not on easy street, but we get along. I don't mind this work. It's what I've been used to. At home, I mean. Only here I get paid for it. I live with an aunt and uncle on the Hill. They've five children. Two are young enough to have some one watch them most of the time. My mother died when I was born, and my father died three years ago. I've always lived with my aunt.

"I think I'll go in training this winter, - that is, if I don't find a good job soon. I'd like to go to the DeGosebriand Hospital in Burlington. But Aunt Edith wants me to go here at the Barre Hospital. I suppose if I do that I'll be stuck in town for the rest of my life. Most of the graduates start nursing here and they stay right on. Few of them get jobs in other States, but that means taking State Board's in whatever State you plan to practice in. A friend of mine who gets through next month is planning to go on general duty up on the Hill. The

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Green Mountain Sanatorium. I 2 wouldn't like that. It would be awfully depressing taking care of T.B. patients all the time. I had an uncle died up there.

"I miss High School. It used to be fun. In the winter we'd have dances after the basketball games. Once upon a time every Montpelier-Barre game meant a fight. Sometimes the players'd fight; sometimes the spectators; sometimes both. When Barre'd win we'd have celebrations — bonfires and parades. I was on the girls's basketball team my Junior year. Last year I had to have my tonsils out, and I no sooner got back to school than I got infection in my left foot. That kept me away from all sports for the winter. Couldn't even skate, and I love that. We have three rinks here. Usually my crowd goes to the rink near St. Monica's church, that's in our neighborhood. A bigger gang goes to the North End rink. There's a ski-tow across from the Barre Country Club. It's a pretty good slops. Last year there were too many people there to let you enjoy yourself.

"Last Sunday we had a Legion [musisesta?]. All the Legion bands in Washington County competed. It was pretty good. They held it at the Recreation field. They must have made plenty of money. By nine o'clock you could hardly find a place to park a car, and the field is big. Governor Aikon was guest of honor. A Legionnaire from Rutland, I think, spoke. He was good. He told about the American nurses who lost their lives furing the war, and he said there were about two hundred of them flat on their backs in government hospitals throughout the country. They'll never be able to walk again because of injuries received during the World War. I'd never thought of nurses losing their lives in that war. Of course, I knew nurses went over and that they did good work, but I never pictured 3 them dying as I have the soldiers. Silly, isn't it? Memorial Day and Armisties Day I always though of the soldiers, but never of the nurses. With all this talk of war it makes you thinks, doesn't it?

"It's been a sort of dull summer. About the only thing you can do is go to the movies - there's three movie houses in town - or go for a walk. I like the pond and lake dances, but I don't get to many of them, my aunt sort of puts her foot down about getting in late. There's

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a dance hall they use for roller skating, it's halfway between Montpelier and Barre. I've only been there twice.

"I learned to skate up back of the quarries," Ann said. "On a small frog pond that was stinking green slime in the summer. All the neighborhood kids used to skate there. They still do. When they're fairly well grown they come down to the large rinks in Barre where there's more excitement.

"We used to swim in an old abandoned quarry on the Hill. That water always felt cooler than any other I've been in. The granite walls shade it and keep it cool. On hot summer days we'd have fights, arguing over who'd claim the pool for the day, the boys or the girls. The boys used to go without their suits; if we saw that the pool was already taken over by them we'd go back home and sulk. We'd have to sneak secretly to the quarry. If any grownups saw us with our bathing suits tucked under our arms and headed for the quarry, they'd make sure to stop by the house and tell our people. We'd all been given orders at home not to swim in the quarry. It got we'd change into our bathing suits at home and wear our dresses [over?] them until we were safely at the quarry.

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"There aren't as many accidents at the quarries as you'd expect. A couple of years ago a little boy was killed in one of them. He'd been playing with older friends near the edge of the quarry. He slipped and rolled, and fell over the rim. That accident put a stop to the younger children playing near the pits.

"The crowd we played with were all from quarrymen's families." We'd gang up on the minister's kids and the school teachers's daughter. We'd warn them away from our pet pool, and keep them from our game. We were mean! We thought because our fathers worked in the quarries we could enjoy more privileges than they. And we thought that because our fathers did more dangerous work than theirs that we were entitled to more

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dangerous games. When we were grown we got over that. In fact, that school teacher's daughter is now one of my closest friends.

"We always heard granite-talk at home. And we'd listen to the men when they'd gather at the general store. They'd talk quarrying and politics, politics and quarrying. They'd never get sick of it. My aunt still talks about the Sunday she ran out of salt as she was getting dinner. She sent Dad to the general store - it used to be open Sundays- and he didn't get back for an hour and a half. We'd all eaten a flat dinner, and my aunt was doing the dishes when he came in with the salt. My older cousin liked to hear the men talk about the old-time quarry owners, the first 'granite kings'. He heard so much about them that he thought they were gods. My aunt says that when he was seven years old he was asked in Sunday school class, who made the world. He answered, 'Old Jim Boutwell.'

"Alvin -that's another cousin always said he was going to be a quarryman, but the folks talked him out of it. He travels in New York now. Salesman for a Barre granite firm. He likes it. It was the glamour and danger of 5 quarrying that appealed to him when he was a kid.

"I remember one night when we were kids, my uncle came home from work feeling unusually tired.

"Get my slippers, Al,' he said.

"Al went after them, but he sulked and said. 'Gee, Dad, why don't you get them yourself.— I'm just an tired an you are—'

"My aunt reminded him that he hadn't been working in a quarry all day like Dad.

"Oh, no!' he said. And he showed them his blistered hands, and told, them that he and his friends were starting a quarry of their own up back of the frogpond. They'd been working at it for a week.

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"My uncle was scared, thinking they had climbed down into some abandoned quarry. He put on his shoes and insisted that Alvin take him to his 'quarry' right away. It proved to be a hole only two feet deep and six feet square, and so muddy from being near the frogpond that my uncle had to demand that they 'start' their quarry in some other spot. It was harmless fun for them. They'd start a new 'quarry' every summer. They'd dig for about two weeks and then give up.

"Father had been in the quarries since he was twenty. He came here then with his family. From Canada. Some little place near Montreal. I never can remember the name. Grandfather was a carpenter, Grandmother ran a boarding house on the hill for a few years. I must have been quite young, I only remember the house we're in now. My aunt's. Grandfather built most of that himself. But I've seen the old boarding house. It's still standing. A rickety old thing with two tiers of sagging porches. It's so close to the road that it gets all the dust from the traffic. It's an 6 apartment house now.

"I went to the graded school on the hill; I came to Barre for high school. That's when the Hill began to lose its attraction. I had no further use for it, neither for skiing nor for skating. We'd skate on a rink at the South End of Barre, or on the river in back of the ice-house.

"That ice-house was burned to the ground yesterday. Two ice-houses, really. They estimate the lose at about \$40.000. Those thousand tons of ice were destroyed. I wish I had seen the fire. It's hard to picture an ice-house burning down.

"The ice-houses belonged to two Barre men. Syrians. We've a small Syrian settlement in Barre. Most of them have done well. They've started with small grocery stores, and now many of them own valuable property on the main street. The businessblock that was burned two months ago was owned by Syrians, too.

"I went to a Syrian classmate's funeral once. They don't keep the bodies at home or in an undertaking establishment. Here in Barre the family usually hires the Odd Fellows'

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Hall, and the body in kept there. I think every Syrian in the State shows up for the funeral, regardless of whether they knew the dead person or not. The third night they have a wake. Each mourner brings his own food. Fruit, cake, meat. They spend the night eating and mourning. One person will start chanting the praises of the dead man or woman; the rest pick up the sing-song, and wail every good deed the dead person has to his credit. It's enough to convince you that the dead person must have been a saint. The prayers are sung too. They have a large display of flowers. Most of the funerals are held from the Catholic church."